

HOMELESS GRANT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HGAP) 2008 PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Grant County – Housing First

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CONTEXT

Grant County is largely rural, with a total population of 83,000 people; the largest city is Moses Lake, with about 18,000 people. Before the creation of the Grant County Homeless Taskforce in 2005, there were limited efforts to coordinate homeless services and housing across the county. The Homeless Taskforce was established in 2005 to identify the issues facing the homeless services system and to develop a Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Grant County.

The Ten-Year Plan estimated a total need for 129 homeless housing units countywide, and a current capacity of 96 homeless units, including 15 short-term shelter beds, 35 units dedicated to individuals with disabilities or special needs, and 49 units for families or single women. The Ten-Year Plan described the needs to prevent homelessness, provide assistance to those who are homeless, and help homeless families reach self-sufficiency. The plan placed an “initial emphasis ... on assistance through rent subsidies and case management towards self-sufficiency.” The plan also emphasized creating low-barrier, “housing first” programs to get people into affordable housing quickly and expand the supply of housing units available for homeless individuals and families.

PROJECT HISTORY

Grant County applied for HGAP funding in the spring 2008 round, and was successfully awarded funding in June 2008 for the Housing First program. The County finalized its contract with CTED in August 2008, and subcontracted overall implementation of the Housing First program to North Columbia Community Action Council (NCCAC).

The Housing First program was designed as a response to the lack of low-barrier housing opportunities for homeless households, and the need for extended housing assistance in order to regain self-sufficiency. The program provides rental apartments to hard-to-serve homeless families and individuals, including households that may be chronically homeless. The priority population is people who are unsheltered, because the recent homeless point-in-time count revealed a higher number of unsheltered homeless persons in Grant County than previously known (nine unsheltered individuals were counted in January 2008 compared to just two in 2007).

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CURRENT ACTIVITY

The case manager for the Housing First program was hired in September 2008, and she began enrolling clients later that month. The program operated on a first-come, first-served basis, as long as the client met the requirements of being homeless with income below 50 percent of the area median income. Most of the initial referrals were through existing homeless service providers, agencies serving victims of domestic violence, or law enforcement agencies. Some clients have been referred after returning to Grant County from prison because of a state law requiring them to return to the county of their conviction, in some cases despite not having family or social networks in Grant County.

By November, the program reached capacity and started a waitlist. All clients receive case management services, including those on the waitlist. Since September, the program has served about 45 clients on the waitlist with case management, including about 10 who were able to transition off the waitlist to stable housing without enrolling in Housing First rental assistance.

After a client is referred to housing assistance, they can be placed into a unit as fast as within one or two days, although sometimes the process takes about a week, because each home must be inspected. In those cases, clients are placed into hotels until their housing units pass inspection. The Housing First program has contracted with a local hotel and uses Emergency Shelter Assistance Program (ESAP) funding for those clients.

The Housing First program was able to build on the existing network of over 60 landlords that were familiar with NCCAC's programs. The Housing First program currently draws on about 30 landlords who have been interested in the program and satisfied with the results so far. The landlords value the case management provided to the tenants, and they also have been motivated altruistically and want to help the families succeed.

OUTCOMES AND PROGRESS

The Housing First program has already seen some success stories, including two clients who became self-sufficient and were able to pay market rents, and one client who transitioned to long-term Tenant Based Rental Assistance through the Housing Authority of Grant County. The two self-sufficient clients live in the Grand Coulee area, where rents are as low as \$200 per month.

One challenge has been the high level of homelessness and the large number of referrals. The priority for the program is still to reach the unsheltered homeless, including people living in cars or tents, or extreme couch-surfers who are constantly

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forced to move around. As the waitlist and client load has grown, the administrative burden has grown, with the case manager responsible for updating the case files and family plans for each client.

Another challenge has been the limited services available in Grant County. There has been no problem linking clients to existing services, but there are no licensed PhDs for mental health treatment in the county. Also, while most law enforcement agencies have been very supportive, there remain some prejudices about serving homeless or minority clients.

The challenge of serving sex offenders is not unique to Grant County, and the Housing First program is not currently serving them. Another offender issue is that if a client is in the program but leaves for an extended incarceration, it may not be in the best interests of the program to hold that program slot for that client, although the client would be eligible to enter again after their release.

PROJECT TIMELINE

2005	State Homelessness Housing and Assistance Act (2163) passed
Summer 2005	Ten-Year Homeless Housing Plan developed by Grant County Homeless Task Force
January 2008	HGAP releases 2008 HGAP RFP
April 2008	Grant County submits HGAP application
June 2008	Grant County Housing First program is successfully awarded HGAP funding
August 2008	HGAP contract start
September 2008	Housing First case manager hired; client intakes begin
November 2008	Housing First program reaches full capacity; starts client waitlist